

This was the final project for the Ethnomusicology 20C (Musical Cultures of the World: Asia) course, taught by Professor Katherine In-Young Lee in Fall 2020 at UCLA. Students worked in groups to research and conduct an oral history with one of seven musicians who also served as a guest lecturer for the course. Each of the narrators are highly esteemed musicians with long professional careers in music performance. They also serve as important liaisons between their home countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the United States.

Profile of Gamin Kang

Gamin [Kang] is an internationally acclaimed Korean musician and soloist. She has toured and performed around the world, and is known for breathing new life into the ancient Korean music tradition by infusing it with other genres around the world. Her primary instruments are the p'iri (double-reed wind instrument), saenghwang (mouth organ), and taepyeongso (shawm), and she has released five albums so far. She has traveled across the world working with musicians like Ned Rothenberg, Jane Ira Bloom, Yo Yo Ma and many others to create brand new sounds by blending her traditions with the styles of the musicians she works with. She is currently based outside of New York City.

In this interview, we discuss her life and work. We began with a discussion of her musical background and how she came to play the p'iri and saenghwang, even touching on the history of the saenghwang. We then discussed her history playing with the National Gugak Orchestra as well as her experiences teaching music outside Korea. She explains how the culture and education surrounding music in Korea is much different from the West, particularly the United States. Finally, we touch on a few of her recent and upcoming projects, including her recent album "Nong" and her postponed performance at Carnegie Hall.

Oral History Interview Transcript: Gamin Kang

Miko Burkholder: My name is Miko Burkholder, it's Friday, November 27th, 2020 at 9:30am Pacific Standard Time here in Portland, Oregon where I am located. This interview is being conducted in tandem with my partner for this project Zane St. Andre Jackson, who is currently in Georgia and three hours ahead. We are very fortunate to have an incredibly talented Korean musician with us today, Gamin, and she is currently located in New Jersey. We are connecting via Zoom for this conference.

MB: I would like to start out by focusing on your primary instrument p'iri. I am wondering if you can describe your first experience hearing the sound the p'iri, and what was it about the timbral quality or tone color that attracted your attention?

Gamin: Very nice to see you guys and it's a great pleasure to talk about my music. I played piano when I was a kid, so piano was my first instrument. I liked to play instruments, so I learned the piano and I learned violin when I was about ten years old and actually I started to learn Korean instrument especially the p'iri when I entered Korean music school. I didn't know actually about Korean music at all because Korean music was not so much popular – especially I mean traditional music is not popular in Korea when I was a kid. I easily exposed to learn classical music like piano and violin, I enjoyed a lot and I was very much curious about Korean music

when I found out Korean music school. So I wanted to know what is Korean music – even I am Korean – but I didn't know about Korean traditional music, so my curiosity guided me to go school and learn instrument. I picked p'iri because my teacher actually recommended me to learn, but my first impression honestly – uhmm – it was shocking! It was – I was shocked. The sounds of instrument is totally different, it's very rough, raw, very earthy – it sounded very different from what I listened before. So that's a new exclamation in Korean music and I enjoyed a lot. It was like a new world, I opened a new door, it was new experience and new challenge, but I was very happy to discover my – you know – my root, my musical identity. I realized, I already have some sense of Korean music because I am Korean and I have gene I guess. Naturally, I fell in love with my instrument and Korean music.

MB: Excellent, thank you. Was – your first experience with the p'iri before your university studies?

G: It was – kind of a high school, so three years high school course. The school is specialized for Korean music and dance, so I studied traditional music in national Korean music and dance high school in Seoul. So, these three years studying allowed me to learn not only Korean music instrument – but also, I had opportunity to learn other genres such as Korean dance, and other vocal training, and all about Korean culture, and history and music – dance ritual. So it was a great opportunity to learn Korean culture and music.

Zane St. Andre Jackson: So I see you also play the saenghwang and I was wondering – because that's actually fairly rare instrument and only a few Korean musicians were trained to play that – is that something that you learned in university or did you pick it up independently? And what was it about the saenghwang that drew you towards it?

G: That's a very good question, I should explain a little bit about the history because saenghwang instrument has long history – more than a thousand years – came from China. China has longer history, but Korea suffered from wars a lot, so we lost some culture and instruments during war time. Even before World War II like in Asia time Korea is peninsula – China is directly connected in North and South Korea has three sides sea and across the sea there is Japan. So we have historically a lot of attack from outside and somehow instrument was disappeared. The saenghwang historically existed in ancient time and it's played by aristocracy and female entertainer widely during Joseon Dynasty, but at some point afterward instrument was disappeared. Actually we couldn't produce instrument and we couldn't find musicians in Korea. My teacher had instrument and he played saenghwang, but it was very rare and there were no majors in school. I learned p'iri as a major, but saenghwang, there were no course for it or major in school. So – but luckily when I graduated university, one of my colleague p'iri player reproduced instruments and learned and he started to teach this instruments to other colleague students. So it was after graduation even I entered orchestra – so I was like a professional musician as an orchestra member, as a p'iri player, but I wanted to learn other instrument and saenghwang is beautiful instrument that give me diverse experience and I can play p'iri, saenghwang, and taepyeongso on a stage that make me to produce different types of music – sounds. So I was interested in learning saenghwang, so I learned individually while I was playing music in orchestra. So those learning process was very exciting because there were not many players and a few musicians started to learn in Korea and after many years I was able to perform

saenghwang, traditional saenghwang, and modified one. So now I'm very happy to play all different wind instruments to make music with more diverse sound and wider range of music.

MB: I think this is a good time to ask about your experience in the National Gugak Orchestra. Did you perform both the saenghwang and the p'iri in the orchestra?

G: Yeah, I was a member of the National Gugak Center until 2010. So, I was mainly p'iri player, p'iri is bamboo flute, that is my major instrument and we didn't have member – special member – for saenghwang because saenghwang is not belong to school curriculum as a major instrument and some musicians pick that instrument as second major or their specialty. So there were not many saenghwang in the orchestra. So yes, I played both p'iri and saenghwang and there were repertoire that was newly composed for saenghwang and orchestra. So it was played quite often, so I played some repertoire for saenghwang and Gugak Orchestra and also I played p'iri as a orchestra member.

ZS: So, were there any – during your six-year span in the Gugak Orchestra, were there any particularly memorable performances or experiences you had in there that you would like to share?

G: As an orchestra member, it was always great to play ensemble with other musicians – especially – orchestra has many members. We had more than fifty musicians and we played like a big ensemble and we played something like chamber ensemble with conductor – sometimes without conductor – mostly composed music, it's all about modern composition. I used to like to play modern composition because I have background to learn classical music in my youth and I like to – I like to make some kind of fusion – and I like to read new music and I was always interested in new music. So, it was great for me to play new composition with my instrument. So it gave me a lot of great opportunity to play modern composition – that – composed by Korean composers, so that was great experience. Also, after many years experience at Korean Gugak Orchestra, I had more interesting to explore new music. So I tried to play new music – like collaborations with composers who come from different cultural background like America, or Europe, or other Asian country. So I worked with some Asian composers – or American composers – who are interested in Korean music and instrument. So many of my musician colleagues wrote piece for Korean instrument, especially for p'iri and saenghwang and I very much enjoy play new composition that is composed by American composer or other composer who come from different country. That gave me more challenge actually, but I learned a lot about different view and different approach to music and different ideas from different background and culture experience. So that's made my experience very rich and I enjoy it a lot.

ZS: Great, thank you.

MB: So, let's see... I think we're gonna shift here to-Zane did you want to ask about her experiences at universities in the United States?

ZS: Sure, so you mentioned that you've been playing with a lot of people around the world and that shaped the sort of compositions and music that interested you, and I saw that you've done lectures and concerts at some US colleges like Harvard and Dartmouth and so from your

experience being over there and spending time there, how would you compare the way music is taught in the United States and in the West to how it's taught in Korea and how you learned it?

G: I came to New York in 2011. There was a program supported by Korean Government, and I was able to tour to many schools in the United States. We had concerts and lectures for students in many different University colleges. My experience... you know, to meet students in school in the United States was very much different from teaching experience in Korea, because I used to teach students who learned, you know, Korean traditional instruments as a major. So I went to Korean music school to teach students who study Korean music so that was more focused on you know, Korean music repertoire. Scales, technique, and you know, knowledge about, you know, specific genre or instruments, and there are not many people who learned Korean instruments as a hobby in Korea unfortunately, because it's not much popular compared to other popular music or Western classical music. So I used to teach people who are seriously learned Korean instruments as a major in the Korean music world. But in States, I had the opportunity to introduce Korean music to people who didn't know about Korean music and what they are interest in a different culture. So it's a totally different experience and a totally different approach. And I enjoyed it a lot because people learn, you know, music from different culture and also, I learned a lot from people whenever I introduce Korean music, I got some questions, or I got some comments. What's their feeling or what's the impression or questions, and that gave me... inspiration and I was able to think about something different way about my culture and I also learned different culture. It gave me...open minded, and it is kind of an exchange. It's not just giving knowledge or introduction, but also I felt it is exchange to learn different culture and I get a lot of influence by those experiences. And that gave me much more... much more open-minded curiosity and desire to discover different culture and music. So it was a great experience.

MB: Great. Did-the performances and teaching at the US universities lead to some of the collaborations with musicians within the United State-say, with Ned Rothenberg,... some of the other collaborations?

G: Yeah. I'm very much enjoying to collaborate with musicians from all over the world, especially in New York. I used to live in New York. Recently I moved out because of pandemic but I'm going back soon. But anyways in New York I had great experience meet musicians who are really talented, open-minded and experienced. I was able to collaborate with jazz musicians, experimental improvisers, and composers. We learned a lot from each other-I worked with a few improvisers, including Ned Rothenberg, Satoshi Takeshi, Elliott Sharp, Jane Ira Bloom, and many others. I collaborated with Ned Rothenberg based on Korean traditional music and jazz. So I discovered something—a freedom in music could be expressed by improvisational technique. Korean traditional music has a lot of actually improvisational elements, especially folk music is not written music. Most music was sung by ordinary people. Some masterpiece folk music composed by master musicians with improvisation. So music was not written in the beginning and it's transcribed later on. That's how we read music and we learn music.

MB: Great.

G: [Connection freezes momentarily] were created by ear. So those similarities between Korean traditional music and jazz music—we discovered something similar music elements. So we collaborated based on improvisational skill from two different culture. So we composed—cocomposed—Jungmori Blues. That is my one of favorite music I played. That is improvisational music but it's written. So we used some Korean traditional modes and I improvised based on that mode, and we made a structure based on some jazz music idea and Ned wrote some modes from blues music to, kind of to mix those different elements. So that was very fun, exciting work. So I would like to mention you will enjoy this music and Jungmori Blues. That is released, actually, recently. My new album, Nong, is released and that music is in the album so I would like to recommend you to listen.

MB: Thank you so much for mentioning that. So, my final question is about a performance that was scheduled to take place, actually in late March of this year at Carnegie Hall and unfortunately it had to be postponed due to the Coronavirus pandemic. But are you comfortable discussing your artistic vision for this particular performance?

G: It was very disappointing [laughs]. I prepared for a long time... I worked with the Korean Orchestra, and I also worked with, you know, American composers, jazz musicians. So my idea was introduction of Korean music and new music that is composed by one of the active jazz musicians in New York. So, this concert, I—I planned—you know, maybe a couple of years ago. It is supposed to be presented by Robert Browning Association. Robert Browning is the director who brought all the world music from all over the world, and we proposed this concert to perform at the Carnegie Hall. And it, you know, we were almost done [laughs] we were almost ready to play on the stage, but you know in last minute, we decided to postpone unfortunately. But I'm very much looking forward to introduce music that is composed by Jeff Fairbanks, who is jazz musician and composer in New York. His background of jazz and his interest into Korean music...made him to compose kind of a new music with new idea, new approach. So this music is for p'iri and gugak orchestra. So we use old traditional sounds from Korean instruments, but the way of expression or technical things are very new. As a performer, I learned a lot new techniques, and you know, I had to play you know, way out of range and I had to learn some new techniques with my instrument, and that was really really great joy to discover, and orchestra also has a certain way to play Korean music. But the composer had kind of new idea, so it is mixed culture between Korean music, classical composition, and some kind of you know jazz culture background. So music is written and composed but the idea of this music is quite interesting and new, and I had a vision to, you know, introduce this kind of new music with different point of view and instrument, creating like a new, sound.

ZS: Great! Well, first of all personally I can say I have listened to Jungmori Blues as well as several of your other compositions, and as a jazz musician it was super fascinating to listen to the way you worked in your traditional Korean music background while also kind of playing the jazz-influenced style, and that was very interesting to listen to. And I can speak for all of us when I say we're really looking forward to seeing your work in the future and as soon as this Coronavirus pandemic is over I'm sure you'll get a chance to perform at Carnegie Hall. That sounds like it's going to be a legendary performance. But yeah, once again, we'd just like to thank you so much for coming on here and giving us the opportunity to learn about you and your life and Korean music and history. Yeah, from both of us, thank you so much.

MB: Yeah.

G: Thank you so much! I am hoping to see you guys in person and play music on a stage some day soon!

ZS: Great, great.

MB: Thank you so much, Gamin.

G: Thank you, take care.